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**Steve Cohen, William Eimicke, and Alison Miller,
*Sustainability Policy: Hastening the Transition to a
Cleaner Economy*. Jossey-Bass, 2015, 288 pp. \$56
Hardcover.**

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Book Review

Sustainability Grounded in Environmentalism

I remember my Dad sharing a story with me about his teenage years growing up in the 1940s in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan. He noted that the river running through his hometown varied from a deep shade of red to vibrant orange at times. His story, multiplied by hundreds across the United States, and salted in with the Cuyahoga River in Ohio catching on fire multiple times through the 1950s and 1960s, and eventually a tipping point was reached in the United States when, in 1972, the Clean Water Act became law. Red and orange were no longer considered acceptable river colors—much less the pollution that created those unnatural river shades.

Today the United States and the world are at a similar crossroad, but this junction comes with indicators very different than past environmental woes. Will we someday refer to Super Storm Sandy as “the first” of the super storms—as we move into a metrological era where the term “hurricane” is no longer sufficient to describe weather influenced by human induced climate change? Time will tell. I do believe, however, that authors Steven Cohen, William Eimicke, and Alison Miller would prefer this not to be our future and their hope is that their new book, *Sustainability Policy: Hastening the Transition to a Cleaner Economy* (2014) will be a nudge toward a sustainable path over a catastrophic path.

Cohen, Eimicke, and Miller’s book makes an important contribution to the discussion of sustainability and its crucial links to the pressing problem of human induced climate change. Perhaps even more importantly, the book makes a strong case for a call to action in terms of sustainability policy, restates eloquently the responsible role government should play in civil society, and provides a partial roadmap toward a more sustainable future. As they note, “Keeping the public safe and secure is the quintessential government function. Damage to the environment needs to be seen as a life-threatening risk to the security of our families and communities” (Cohen et al, 2014, p.30).

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The Lay of the Land within *Sustainability Policy*

Sustainability Policy is a comprehensive introduction of the concept of sustainability. Cohen, Eimicke, and Miller confront head on the challenge of sustainability: it sounds like a great idea but the devil is in the details. Their first two chapters start by answering a number of the tough questions: What is sustainability? How do we collectively define sustainability? What are the key inputs toward successful sustainability policy? I was impressed by the authors' ability to provide depth to the definition of sustainability while at the same time making the topic approachable to a reader without previous exposure to the subject.

One critique of the book is that it is highly United States centric in its presentation. If a reader is coming into the book expecting a fully formed international perspective on the topic this reader will be disappointed. For this reader, however, there are numerous survey-level discussions of the "best of the best" policies happening at the international level.

I choose to simply observe this orientation rather than criticize it. Cohen, Eimicke, and Miller have geared their book toward sparking United States based action and they make a strong case within this specific focus. Chapters 3 -5 of the book provide in-depth analyses of current and potential policy actions from a United States perspective. Chapter 3 focuses on the Federal level. Chapter 4 turns to the state level across the United States. Then Chapter 5 looks at the local level, with a focus on urban areas. Under the United States Federalist system of government, and in the vacuum created by the lack of federal action to date, this three-level approach to climate change and sustainability policy provides many insights into the states and cities across the United States that have become laboratories for policy action and change implementation on the sustainability front.

The key thesis of the authors: "Building a sustainable economy requires that government take the lead, fund the required basic research, regulate private firms, build infrastructure, and reward sustainable practices" (Cohen et al., 2014, p.28). Government is necessary and can act in five direct ways toward proactively moving our society and the world to a more sustainable future, via: Funding of basic scientific research, funding of sustainable infrastructure, use tax codes to create incentives favoring sustainability, using regulatory rules and enforcement to prevent unsustainable economic activity, and develop and maintain a generally accepted suite of sustainability metrics. This government action in conjunction with strong public-private partnerships moving forward will be the key to unlocking a sustainable future for our planet. "Just as government built ports, canals, dams, railroads, and highways—the infrastructure of the 19th and 20th centuries—it must build the energy, communications, research, waste, and water management infrastructure needed for the 21st century" (Cohen et al., 2014, p.31). They note that in addition to repairing and rebuilding existing infrastructure in the United States, moving forward the definition of infrastructure must include smart grids, public charging stations for electric vehicles, high-speed rail lines, high-speed internet access, new and more efficient water systems. Put simply, green infrastructure over grey infrastructure.

The final chapters of the book turn to measures and metrics of sustainability (Chapter 6), a frank discussion of the politics of sustainability (Chapter 7), and Chapter 8 concludes with a call to action toward sustainability. As the authors note, in an age where climate change is a scientific reality, the time for change is now and the need for a transition to a low-carbon, cleaner, greener, and sustainable future is key. The authors conclude with a choice and their vote, "In our view, the transition process can be gentle or brutal and abrupt. We vote for gentle" (Cohen et al., 2014, p.226).

Where Sustainability Policy Excels

The strength of *Sustainability Policy* is its robust explanation of why we need sustainability policy, why governments (at all levels) play a critical role—with the federal level of government necessarily fulfilling a cornerstone role, and the presentation of cost-benefit data that clearly indicates the concept of environment versus economy is an outdated model.

“Since 1997 the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has reported that the benefits of all federal regulations have far exceeded their costs” (Cohen et al., 2014, p.194). The evidence is thus clear, the benefits born from environmental regulation and greener energy technologies greatly outweigh the costs for the same. However, Cohen, Eimicke, and Miller end this discussion on a more cautionary note, “The problem is that the benefits measured by OMB come to all of us, but some of the costs come to the kind of people who donate money to political campaigns” (Cohen et al., 2014, pp.195-196).

Where Sustainability Policy Falters

My strongest criticism of the book is Chapter 6: Sustainability Measurement and Metrics. However, I largely cannot blame Cohen, Eimicke, and Miller for my frustration with this chapter. As they note, “The gross domestic product (GDP) indicator has been around since the 1930s but there is still no such all-encompassing measure for environmental quality and planetary health” (Cohen, et al., 2014, p.28). While the Chapter provides a good survey of what is currently available and a sketch as to where we need to go, more than anything the chapter painfully lays out the inadequacy of our current sustainability measurements—both within the United States and globally. As the authors’ note, “it is time to begin the process of settling on sustainability indicators that everyone can use and understand. We need a generally accepted set of definitions and indicators for measuring sustainability” (Cohen et al., 2014, p.161).

Rather than truly discuss metrics to date in any depth, the authors instead choose to point to the major players in current efforts toward measuring sustainability. The key conclusion: sustainability metrics must move in the direction of becoming reliable, universally comparable, mandatory, and reviewed by independent third parties. “In addition to a common set of metrics, we need a standardized process for data collection, verification, and audit. We need a measurement *system*, not simply a set of measures” (Cohen et al., 2014, p.172). Cohen, Eimicke, and Miller estimate that roughly a dozen sustainability measures are likely to be settled upon in the near future. They want these to be globally universal and national-level standards. Again, the authors stress governments key role in this transition, “The public sector is a key player in advancing and supporting sustainability metrics, measurement, and reporting. It can play a role in mandating and monitoring various forms of sustainability reporting, in guiding the development of specific information that private business, as well as public and nonprofit organizations, ought to measure and communicate externally. Government must also establish and maintain national indicators of sustainability, including measures of green jobs or the green economy” (Cohen et al., 2014, p.172)

While the authors do mention sustainability measures that are comprehensive to sustainability and thus inclusive of environmental, social, and governance measures, the authors certainly do place a premium on settling on the environmental measures first and foremost, even expressing some concern as to the measurability of social and governance measures. “In practice, social impacts are more difficult to observe and quantify than environmental impacts” (p.163) . . . “Governance indicators are the least quantitative of the three types” (p.164). Thus

Journal of Economic and Social Thought

while the book makes mention of social indicators of sustainability the text is clearly planted in the literature where sustainability policy is an outgrowth of environmental policy and is the next step toward “greening” or “cleaning” the economic engine that runs both the United States and the world as a whole today.

Comparisons and Conclusions

While Cohen, Eimicke, and Miller are perfectly willing to inject their opinion within the text, they do not become lost in it and they make a strong case for their opinions by grounding them with past scientific, economic, and public policy research findings. Likewise their proposed actions are grounded in the uncomfortable political realities of today. I contrast this against Naomi Klein’s book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* where I feel her book suffers from getting lost in her personal opinions on the topic and her focus on proposals that are unrealistic given current political and economic realities today. Likewise I contrast with Marc Epstein’s *Making Sustainability Work* that is perhaps too conceptual and not enough “realworld” for many readers. By contrast, *Sustainability Policy* finds both the policy “middle ground” between these other books and provides a necessary “real world orientation”. The book is also very frank regarding the current toxic political climate in the United States where both basic scientific facts and the scientific method itself are in question today. Finally the book bluntly presents the entrenched players with a vested interest in today’s carbon energy based status quo.

In closing, I would note *Sustainability Policy: Hastening the Transition to a Cleaner Economy* offers many new insights to a reader interested in the topic of sustainability and a greener future. Inclusive of my criticism and critiques, I can say without hesitation that I recommend this is a book to anyone interested in sustainability policy, climate change policy, renewable energy policy, and renewable production policy. The book finds the challenging balances between topic depth and breadth and between laymen-knowledge and expert-knowledge, making it approachable for nearly any reader. Certainly scholars of sustainability policy would benefit from giving the book a reading, but likewise so would researchers of public policy in general, and likewise economists, political scientists, environmentalists, and an interested lay individuals. Sustainability policy and climate change policy are at a crossroads today, in looking for a roadmap as to which path to take, I would certainly include Cohen, Eimicke, and Miller’s *Sustainability Policy: Hastening the Transition to a Cleaner Economy*.



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